George McGovern
U. S. Ambassador to the FAO

We have had a considerable amount of discussion today on risk taking and risk assessment but it occurred to me as I was waiting for Jonathan Taylor to introduce me that one risk I hadn't properly assessed is the danger of speaking last after a long day of brilliant speeches, from which we have learned a great deal today.

But with that risk in mind, I want to thank Jonathan Taylor and SOAS for hosting this conference and express my thanks to Philip Stott, who has done such a good and cheerful job of guiding us through these deliberations and I want to thank the U.S. Embassy for their part in sponsoring this conference. I also want to thank the Embassy for the fact that I lost my passport and they are now in the process of getting a new one. It does cost you 60 bucks.

I considered that as much as this conference attracted me, I seriously considered seeing if I could get out of coming here, partly because of the risk involved. I have a patient long-suffering wife who has tolerated my much travelled schedule for more than 50 years, and since we had just arrived at our place at Montana from Rome, she thought this was an ill-advised departure. But, I'll deal with that risk when I get home, assuming I can get in the house.

The other risk, of course, is always some risk in flying. Aeroplanes do crash once in a while. I flew a bomber in the second world war for about a year, with people shooting at me every day. So I know something about the hazards of air travel. Fortunately, nobody shot at our 747 yesterday. It is interesting to note though that when aeroplanes were first experimented with by the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, almost immediately there was a lobby that formed in the U.S. opposing air travel, on the grounds that it was obviously dangerous. But fortunately, I think, after a certain amount of risk assessment by aeronautical engineers and improvement in the design of aircraft and the establishment of a Federal Regulatory Agency, it was considered worth the trouble.

Now it may be a bit of a stretch to compare aeroplane flying risk with the risk of biotechnology in agriculture, but the principle is the same. There is a risk in almost any human endeavour. There is a risk involved in any kind of agriculture, but what I would plead for here today is not anything that is original with me. Dr Borlaug and others have been making this case for years, that the risk of applying a scientific knowledge, biotechnical knowledge if you please, is worth it in terms of the results. In terms of the end product, but always we ought to subject these judgments to the best scientific knowledge we can bring to bear on it. That doesn't mean that science has always been right, that has been pointed out here. But it is the best thing we have going for us in determining what food is safe, what practices are safe, what environmental hazards there are. It seems to me that if those judgements are applied most people will come down on the side of using our new information on biotechnology to help especially the developing world.

Now everyone of us is biased in some way by their own background and even by their own current occupations. As Jonathan Taylor said, I am currently serving in Rome as the American Ambassador to three UN agencies that are located there, the largest and oldest being FAO but the World Food Programme is also extremely important as is IFAD, which in a sense is a bank.

Throughout my life I've always found it necessary, if I was going to be satisfied with myself, to have some kind of a project that I felt passionate about. I heard some warning about passion here a while ago but most of my life it's the things I have been passionate about that have given me the greatest satisfaction. My current passion is this. I would like to see the United Nations commit itself to providing a good nutritious lunch every day for every school child in the world.

I would like to see that same United Nations provide nutritional supplements for every needy, pregnant and nursing mother and their infants through the age of five. Those two companion pieces have worked extremely well in the countries that have experimented with them. They are working very well in the developing world where we have experimented with them on a pilot basis. But as we meet here this afternoon arguing the relative merits of science and agriculture, I think we must not forget that out there in the developing world are an estimated 300 million kids who go to school or are of school age, and I am limiting this to primary ages through grades one to six, 300 million of them in that age bracket who do not receive anything to eat during the school day.

They trudge off to school in the morning and maybe walk a mile or so to the village school, and they sit there through six hours of instruction with nothing to eat, unless they happen to have been given a piece of bread or something at home to take with them. There are about 130 million of these school age young kids who do not go to school. They are condemned the lives of illiteracy, most of them are girls, because of the favouritism towards males in so many developing countries.

Now what happens when you start a good well-run school lunch programme? Well, we know what happens because we have these pilot programmes working in 30 developing countries today. They are not nationwide programmes but they are big enough pilot in each case to let you know what happens when you institute a programme of this kind.

Three things happen. First of all, school attendance jumps dramatically because mothers and fathers hear that their youngsters can get a good meal everyday in the middle of the day if they just go the village school, they make a greater effort to get their children there. It frees up, if not anything else, it frees up more food from the meagre family food budget for the people at home. The second thing that happens is that academic performance jumps dramatically. I tell you I am a former teacher, I guess professors qualify as teachers, and I don't know how education can take

place with little folks on an empty stomach. Nutrition is the handmaiden of education. And a third thing happens to the girls. Whereas these illiterate girls start getting married at the age of 10, 11, 12, 13 somewhere in that area and have an average of six children for each of these little illiterate mothers, children having children. The girls who go to school, even if it is just the primary grades, the first six, they marry later in life. They have a better sense of life and what its values are all about, and they have an average of 2.9 children. Education is the best remedy anybody has yet found for burgeoning birthrates.

We had a former Secretary of the Treasury, Lawrence Summers. Maybe some of you have met Mr Summers, he is now about to become President of Harvard College. He said after a career with the World Bank, before he became Secretary of the Treasury, that dollar for dollar, pound for pound if you please, the best investment we can make and the greatest return is the education of girls in the developing world. If you stop to think about it, it is so true.

I tried to sell this idea of the universal school lunch programme to a couple of ambassadors in Washington. I thought I had a little time one afternoon, and I'd just experiment. I spoke to the Australian ambassador first and he said "you know the thing I worry about Senator is this some scheme for dumping U.S. surpluses on the market?" I said well look, there is going to be some American surpluses in this programme, maybe even some from Australia, and what is wrong with that if it is used carefully under the direction of people who protect commercial markets.

We have an inter-agency committee in the U.S. government that I used to chair when I directed the "Food for Peace" programme in the Kennedy administration. That committee is very tough and their goal is to make sure that not one bushel of U.S. grain or soybeans or powdered milk or anything else is given away that disturbs somebody's market; either the markets of the receiving country or our own commercial markets. The U.S., afterall, is the biggest commercial grain shipper in the world. We are not interested in destroying commercial markets.

And so if the people are worried about surpluses getting into this programme, I invite any country that has surpluses to sign up and help us out on this programme and through the UN agencies and other national agencies we can make sure it doesn't disrupt commercial markets.

Incidentally, these little folks that are not eating during the school day are not in the commercial market during those days. They just don't eat. You won't see very many eight year olds in Bangladesh bidding on sow bellies at the Chicago Board of Trade. They are not in the commercial markets.

The other ambassador that I talked to, whom I am not sure I convinced, listened to me and he said, "well Senator, you have a reputation as an idealist and we all admire you but we don't go too much for these giveaways." He said "our notion after World War II and you helped us with the Marshall Plan." I might as well tell

you this was the German Ambassador, he won't object to this because I am making his argument for him. He said "we took that Marshall Plan money and we put it into rebuilding our factories, our plants, our tools, our machinery and that is the long term sustainable development we are interested in." I said well Mr Ambassador, you are absolutely right about that, but the best machinery we have is right up here in the brains of these youngsters and the strength of their hands. If you don't have young people who are educated and strong you've got nothing in the way of building factories or anything else.

So while this may seem like a stretch in talking about this idea here today in a conference that is being held on biotechnology and agriculture, it is not a stretch if you consider that the whole purpose of biotechnology and agriculture as such is to try to feed hungry people with sanitary food, with nutritious food, and to do it at minimum damage to the environment, at minimum consumption of water, which is in critical short supply. To do it with the least practical use of pesticides and herbicides. I believe all those things become more feasible with an agriculture that employs science and especially this comparatively new science that we call biotechnology.

I want to say to you that these new methods are being very carefully tested under CODEX, the international word for fair food standards, makes a very careful analysis of all aspects of the issues that have been raised here today, so does the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, so does the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

I don't argue here that the United States is always right but we have a first rate testing system for food in the Food and Drug Administration. I will put it up against any in the world and I think that USDA has a wonderful food inspection system.

Now there are just two things and Jonathan Taylor has suggested I make my remarks brief for obvious reasons. There are two suggestions I want to make that I think might make it easier for people to accept biotechnology. One of those is that I would like to see more funding for research and development on biotechnology in the public sector. I am not against private enterprise. I am not against Monsanto and others but I think they have too big a share of the market in research and development on biotechnology. And if we had a more even balance in those areas I think it would help get public acceptability.

We know that corporations are a collection of people and people make mistakes, they also do a lot of worthwhile things, and I am not for ruling them out of this area of research and development. But what I suggest is that they be complemented by a more solid public investment in research and development.

The public is a bigger collection of people. They can also make mistakes. I saw that in 1972, but nonetheless, when the public makes a mistake in one of its endeavours its more transparent usually than is the case with the closely held corporate decisions. So that would be my first suggestion.

Secondly, I would suggest that we undertake a more serious evaluation that has been suggested here of the various aspects of biotechnology that is already in progress in large areas. The United States has the biggest area but there are large parts of the world that engage in biotechnical agriculture and it would be good to have further studies and the release of those studies.

It would also be helpful if we had such studies on the hazards of conventional agriculture because they too exist. One of the speakers here pointed out earlier today that we have had a whole host of studies on biotechnology farming but not very many on conventional farming and the impact it has on the environment and on the food supply.

So, with those two provisos in mind, I believe with Dr. Borlaug and many others who have been heroes of mine over the years in biotechnology, I think it is worth trying to answer some of the fears and questions that have been raised about it but until that time, I have to tell you, that I am going to keep my eye basically on the hungry children around the world and see what we can do to help them in the near future.

Thank you.